

**PLANNING FOR AND APPLYING MILITARY FORCE:  
AN EXAMINATION OF TERMS**

**Paul K. Van Riper**

**March 2006**

Visit our website for other free publication downloads

<http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

[To rate this publication click here.](#)

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>MAR 2006</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Planning for and Applying Military Force: An Examination of Terms</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5244</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <b>The original document contains color images.</b>					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>24</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

\*\*\*\*\*

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This report is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

\*\*\*\*\*

An earlier version of this paper was prepared for a Hicks & Associates, Inc. Defense Adaptive Red Team (DART) project. The DART is funded by the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Advanced Systems & Concepts to encourage innovation and strengthen operational concepts through rigorous assessment.

\*\*\*\*\*

Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Ave, Carlisle, PA 17013-5244.

\*\*\*\*\*

All Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) monographs are available on the SSI homepage for electronic dissemination. Hard copies of this report also may be ordered from our homepage. SSI's homepage address is: *www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil*.


\*\*\*\*\*

The Strategic Studies Institute publishes a monthly e-mail newsletter to update the national security community on the research of our analysts, recent and forthcoming publications, and upcoming conferences sponsored by the Institute. Each newsletter also provides a strategic commentary by one of our research analysts. If you are interested in receiving this newsletter, please subscribe on our homepage at *www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/newsletter/*.

ISBN 1-58487-229-2

## FOREWORD

Despite common opinion, doctrine never stands still. Concepts are redefined, added to, and subtracted from, over time. Often the changes result in improvements, but occasionally they do not. As Joint doctrine is currently undergoing some potentially major revisions, Lieutenant General (USMC, Ret.) Paul Van Riper, an experienced warfighter and accomplished forward-thinker, asks the doctrine community to take a step back from the process of change and take a hard look at the differences between the original concepts and the proposed revisions. If, after doing so, the proposed revisions clearly amount to a step forward, then we should proceed. Otherwise, we might question the value of implementing the proposed changes. In any case, pausing for sober reflection even in periods of comprehensive change is a healthy habit.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

PAUL K. VAN RIPER retired from the United States Marine Corps in October 1997 at the rank of Lieutenant General after more than 41 years of commissioned and enlisted service. During those years, he served in a variety of command and staff billets at posts and stations around the world, including seven tours in the Fleet Marine Force where he commanded at every level from infantry platoon to division. He participated in or observed combat operations during five tours. As a second lieutenant, he commanded a platoon in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic crisis. As a first lieutenant, he was an advisor to the Republic of Vietnam's Marine Corps. As a captain, he led a rifle company in Vietnam. As a major, he was a United Nations Observer in the Sinai Desert and southern Lebanon. As a brigadier general, he served with I Marine Expeditionary Force in Operation DESERT STORM. In retirement, Lieutenant General Van Riper continues to participate in an array of defense and security related war games, seminars and conferences, and lectures frequently at professional military schools. He also consults part time for a number of government agencies and commercial firms on defense and operational matters. Lieutenant General Van Riper held the Marine Corps University's Donald Bren Chair of Innovation and Transformation during Academic Year 2005-06. He is a graduate of the Army's Airborne and Ranger Schools, the Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School, the Navy's College of Command and Staff, and the Army War College.

## SUMMARY

This Letort Paper briefly examines current and, in some cases, still evolving definitions in joint doctrine—especially with regard to strategy, center of gravity, decisive point, and commander’s intent. It discusses the heritage of those concepts and terms, most of which derived from the writings of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. In so doing, the author finds that current joint planning definitions and concepts tend to confuse more than they inform. In short, they are not ready to be incorporated into formal doctrine, and certainly not into the actual planning process. Hence, concept developers need to go back to the drawing table, and make a concerted effort to separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff. Change is good, but so is tradition. The definitions advanced by Sun Tzu and Clausewitz have stood the test of time for good reasons. If we decide to change them, we should have equally good reasons for doing so.



# PLANNING FOR AND APPLYING MILITARY FORCE: AN EXAMINATION OF TERMS

## **Background.**

The Joint Chiefs of Staff produced a complete body of joint doctrine for the first time in 1995. This joint doctrine drew heavily from service doctrines, especially materials published by the Army and Marine Corps after 1982. In turn, the service doctrines of this period incorporated many of the ideas developed during the American military renaissance of the late 1970s and early 1980s, ideas based largely upon the theories of Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz, Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu, and other more recent military scholars.

Unfortunately, the bureaucratic procedures the military employed to develop and publish new service and joint doctrines diminished the classical theorists' and contemporary scholars' eloquent definitions. At the same time, these procedures added unnecessary terms. Nonetheless, joint and service doctrines, built for the most part upon established theory, provide a rich store of knowledge for the practitioner of operational art. As a rule, officers regularly have turned to this body of knowledge to plan and conduct operations over the past 15 years. The success of Operations DESERT STORM, ENDURING FREEDOM, and the initial attack of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM demonstrates the strength and utility of existing doctrines.

This Letort Paper briefly examines current joint doctrine to identify the concepts and associated terms that are to guide the planning of joint operations. The paper also discusses the heritage of these concepts and terms, mainly those gleaned from the writings of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu and their later disciples.

In short, this paper describes the essence of current joint planning concepts and links key terms to their intellectual antecedents. The purpose is to provide a framework against which to compare suggested new planning models. If advocates of novel planning concepts are able to show how such concepts can improve upon the ones described in this paper and, in turn, enhance military planning, they will have gone a long way towards proving the merits of their



innovations. Contrarily, if they are unable to demonstrate a modicum of improvement, they must necessarily revisit their ideas or abandon them.

## **Military Planning.**

Military leaders routinely face situations or problems where they have to decide what actions to take. In addition, military leaders must supervise execution of their decisions. When such leaders make decisions in anticipation of future action, they are in effect *planning*. One manual states that, "Planning involves projecting our thoughts forward in time and space to influence events *before* they occur rather than merely responding to events as they occur."<sup>1</sup> In a literal sense, leaders inescapably make all decisions in advance of taking action. Therefore, planning as discussed here refers to situations where there is sufficient time to employ a decisionmaking *process*.

At its most basic level, planning requires that a leader have an idea of the outcome or results desired from a plan. In addition, execution of a plan requires resources. Said differently, planning consists of determining and then balancing *ends* and *means*. Not surprisingly, classical theorists acknowledged the importance of first identifying ends and then matching the means needed to achieve those ends.

Over time theorists, scholars, and practitioners enlarged upon the simple *ends, means* model, and selected terms to support more detailed and explicit planning. They recognized that *how*, that is, the *methods* or *ways*, means are employed is important, thus, the current *ends, ways, and means* paradigm. In trying to understand where to focus the available means, theoreticians created concepts such as *center of gravity* and *decisive points*. Likewise, knowing *why* a military expected to use force led to notions of *intent* or *commander's intent*, terms used to identify the purpose of an action. The desire for tools to permit assigning certain responsibilities to specific units saw creation of terms like *mission* and *objectives*. Finally came a term to describe the desired post-conflict or after-battle situation, or *end-state*.

The following paragraphs discuss the origins and meanings of this current doctrinal vocabulary.

## Ends, Ways, and Means.

Clausewitz recognized the importance of clearly establishing the reason for going to war when he wrote, “No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.”<sup>2</sup> He wrote extensively about the need to relate *ends* and *means* in his classic, *On War*. One authority on Clausewitz’s work notes that appreciation of *ends* and *means* “is, essentially, what the whole book is about. . . .”<sup>3</sup> At the highest levels of government, Clausewitz argued, the ends of war are always for a political purpose. He acknowledged, however, that there will be a series of lesser aims that leaders attempt to achieve in order to reach the ultimate end. He listed the first of these as the need “to compel our enemy to do our will.”<sup>4</sup> He further observed that, “To secure that object, we must render the enemy powerless; and that in theory, is the true aim of warfare.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, at the campaign level, the object (or *end*) is to “overcome the enemy and disarm him.”<sup>6</sup> At the tactical level, disarming the enemy requires destruction of his fighting forces (the *ends*).

Clausewitz created a similar hierarchical structure for *means*, the highest being combat. He acknowledged that combat could take a number of forms, not all of which require physical destruction of the enemy, an instance being actions that cause an enemy to abandon a position without fighting. Although, as he noted, “the gradation of objects at the various levels of command will further separate the first *means* from the ultimate purpose,” connoting there must be a correlation of ends and means at each level if there is to be a realistic weighing of the costs and benefits of any war.<sup>7</sup>

The other great classical theorist, Sun Tzu, was not as clear as Clausewitz was in his writing about *ends* and *means*. A review of various translations of his work does not reveal these words used in the same unambiguous manner as Clausewitz. Nonetheless, a noted scholar, Michael Handel, argues that Sun Tzu employed what today we know as the rational decisionmaking model to calculate *ends* and *means*.<sup>8</sup> He quotes two paragraphs from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* to support his case:

Weigh the situation, then move.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, p. 106

Now the elements of the art of war are first, measurement of space; second, estimation of quantities; third, calculations; fourth, comparisons; and fifth, chances of victory.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, p. 88

Quantities derive from measurement, figures from quantities, comparisons from figures, and victory from comparisons.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, p. 88

Handel claims that these statements reflect a process where “such factors as objectives, considerations of relative strength, and the comparison of opponents lead to the weighing of different courses of action and to estimating the probability of victory.”<sup>9</sup>

The *ends-means* paradigm of the classical theorists appears in the writings of numerous modern military scholars. For example, Liddell Hart, despite his disdain for many of Clausewitz’s ideas, defined strategy as, “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy.”<sup>10</sup> J. C. Wylie, proposed that strategy was a “plan of action designed in order to achieve some end; a purpose together with a system of measure for its accomplishment.”<sup>11</sup> Colin Gray characterized strategy as “the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy.”<sup>12</sup>

Several contemporary scholars of strategy broadened the basic Clausewitzian *ends-means* concept, specifically by adding *ways* to the equation. As a case in point, Army Colonel Arthur F. Lykke, Jr. credited General Maxwell D. Taylor with introducing the idea of “ways” in a visit to the U.S. Army War College in 1981 and then expanded on the thought in his own writing.<sup>13</sup> In another example, Air Force Colonel Dennis Drew and Dr. Donald Snow state that, “In the modern era, it is much more accurate and descriptive to consider strategy as a complex *decisionmaking process* that connects the ends sought (objectives) with the ways and means of achieving those ends.”<sup>14</sup> Military writers such as Lykke, Drew, and Snow frequently identified *ways* as operational concepts, courses of action, or methods used to attain the desired *ends*. Another current military writer,

John Collins, described *ends, ways, and means* based on the names Rudyard Kipling provided his “six honest serving men.” Collins set them forth this way:

- “What” and “Why” correspond to perceived requirements (**ends**),
- “How, When and Where” indicate optional courses of action (**ways**),
- “Who” concerns available forces and resources (**means**).<sup>15</sup>

Of the keystone joint publications, Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, discusses the *ends-ways-means* construct most explicitly. In describing the requirement imposed on combatant commanders to develop plans for military operations, Joint Publication 3-0 notes that, “The result, expressed in terms of **military objectives, military concepts, and resources (ends, ways, and means), provides guidance for a broad range of activities.**”<sup>16</sup> [Bold type contained in the original.] On the other hand, this publication does not provide clear and specific definitions for each these three separate terms. As an illustration, Joint Publication 3-0 identifies ends variously as strategic and operational objectives, goals, and effects. Though the manual appears to use objectives and goals as synonyms, the use of effects is not always clear. For instance, chapter III, paragraph 5.j. contains the statement, “The essence of operational art lies in being able to *mass effects* against the adversary’s sources of power in order to destroy or neutralize them.” [Italics added.] The phrase “mass effects” in this context suggests means, that is, forces or weapons, not ends. Otherwise, if we employee synonyms and assume mass is used as a verb, we are saying *collect results* or *assemble consequences*, outcomes difficult to imagine. Paragraph 6.d. of the same chapter makes the following statements: “While some fires will support operational and tactical movement and maneuver . . . , other fires are independent of maneuver and orient on achieving specific operational and strategic effects that support the JFC’s objectives. **Fires are the effects of lethal or nonlethal weapons.**” [Bold type contained in the original.] In the first of these sentences, “effects” seems to be synonymous with results or outcomes and represents *ends*. The second sentence is difficult to interpret. If fires and effects

are synonymous (which seems to be the case since “are” is the present plural of “be”) the sentence is nonsensical. The sentence could just as easily read, “Results are the results of weapons.”

Despite the apparent inconsistencies in each term’s definitions, all U.S. professional military schools teach the *ends, ways, means* paradigm and the joint planning community uses it commonly, seemingly having no difficulty understanding its basic connotation.

## Center of Gravity.

Clausewitz maintained that to achieve a war’s ultimate end, that is, breaking the enemy’s will, a nation must direct all of its efforts at a center of gravity or *schwerpunkt*.<sup>17</sup> Although he borrowed the term from physics—defined as the *focal point* where the mass of a body is concentrated and the forces of gravity can be said to converge—he used it in a more abstract manner, noting that it is, “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.”<sup>18</sup> He conceded that in nearly all circumstances, unlike in a physical body, there would be more than a single center of gravity. Nonetheless, he cautioned, “The first principle is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest possible sources, and ideally to one alone.”<sup>19</sup> Clausewitz provided several examples of centers of gravity—an enemy’s army, its capital, or a primary ally.

Sun Tzu’s thoughts on the object of war are less clear than Clausewitz’s, though he also presents a hierarchy of things to attack. At the top of his list is the “enemy’s strategy,” followed by “his alliances,” then “his army,” and, finally, “cities—only when there is no alternative.”<sup>20</sup> Michael Handel suggests that Sun Tzu’s implied concept of a “center of gravity is . . . on a different, much higher plane.”<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz provides “concrete guidance for action,” while Sun Tzu offers “a metaphor” and “[g]uidance for action in general.”<sup>22</sup>

During World War I, the German Army expanded on Clausewitz’s notion of a *schwerpunkt* and applied the concept extensively at the operational and tactical levels of war. A current student of German military thought observed “in early 1915, the Austro-Hungarian chief of staff, Franz Conrad von Hotzendorf . . . saw the enemy army

as a system that could be disintegrated by force concentrated at a similarly critical factor.”<sup>23</sup> Whereas Clausewitz focused on one center of gravity or a few that led back to the one, von Hotzendorf was interested in a larger number within just a portion of the enemy’s force.<sup>24</sup> In the latter half of 1915, Captain Willy Rohr enlarged on the concept further when he identified machinegun positions as the tactical center of gravity and developed new techniques for task-organized squads that became the foundation for the German storm battalions.<sup>25</sup> These techniques provided the foundation for the more expansive German tactic of infiltration used later in the war.

German combined arms doctrine—derived from earlier infiltration tactics—employed in World War II emphasized the rapid concentration of armored units on operational centers of gravity. People studying this doctrine “began to confuse *schwerpunkt* with another key element of operational design—the *decisive point*.”<sup>26</sup> Swiss born French General Antoine Henri Jomini originated this latter term, stating that, of *strategic points*, those “whose importance is constant and immense . . . are called DECISIVE strategic points.”<sup>27</sup> [Capital letters contained in original.] Jomini drops the word *strategic* from the term less than a page after introducing it, leaving the now familiar *decisive point*.

Though Clausewitz used the term—“The best strategy is always *to be very strong*: first in general, and then at the decisive point”—it is Jomini’s use of the phrase that is more accurate when applied to blitzkrieg.<sup>28</sup> Clausewitz’ decisive point referred to a mass against which to concentrate force; Jomini’s represented “a portion of the enemy, such as a flank, or it may be a piece of terrain, the destruction of which will lead to a decision in the operation.”<sup>29</sup> In a sense, Clausewitz looked at a decisive point as something to demolish; Jomini saw it as something to leverage. Those possessed with a Clausewitzian orientation usually talk of destroying decisive points, while those with a Jominian persuasion most often describe decisive points as places to dislocate or “unhinge” an enemy.

To confuse matters further, a mistranslation in a 1942 book on blitzkrieg, *Attacks* by F. O. Miksche, rendered *schwerpunkt* as “thrust-point.”<sup>30</sup> This error prompted many later manuals to refer to the center of gravity as the “point of main effort.” Adding even more

to the misunderstanding, a British writer suggested that a better term might be “focus of energy.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, a member of the “military reform movement” of the 1980s put another twist on the expression when he presented the thought that the *schwerpunkt* described, “the object of focus for the efforts of all subordinate and supporting units, generally expressed in terms of a particular friendly unit.”<sup>32</sup> These interpretations can lead the casual student to conclude that anything subject to attack is potentially a center of gravity, very different from the original meaning of Clausewitz.

Because of the confusion noted above, center of gravity is a frequent topic in the works of many present-day military writers. Numerous small books, pamphlets, and articles published over the last 15 years attest to the considerable interest in the subject. In a guide that resulted from a 2-year study, two U.S. Army officers offer “a method for determining the center of gravity of any entity or actor, friendly or enemy; for analyzing campaign options; and for applying center of gravity determinations to the planning and execution of campaigns.”<sup>33</sup> A Marine Corps University professor, concerned about confusion on the concept, made an impassioned plea in a paper to, “as a minimum return to the Clausewitzian meaning of centers of gravity as moral and physical strengths, while simultaneously retaining the concept of ‘critical vulnerabilities’ as critical weaknesses. . . .”<sup>34</sup>

*Center of gravity* entered the joint vocabulary during the military reform movement of the 1980s. Though military officers applied the term loosely at first, they now evidence a good understanding of the term and generally use it consistent with the official joint definition, which reads, “Those characteristics, capabilities, or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight.”<sup>35</sup> Several keystone Joint Publications—1, 3-0, and 5-0—note the importance of centers of gravity, commending commanders to focus on the enemy’s strategic and operational centers of gravity when drawing up plans. Though Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, recognizes that the term applies at the strategic level, the manual focuses on its employment at the operational level as an analytical tool useful when designing campaigns. The manual also observes that when an enemy protects its center of gravity well from direct attack, commanders need to

“seek an indirect approach.”<sup>36</sup> Often the object of such an indirect attack will be a *decisive point*.

## Decisive Point.

As noted in the previous section, Jomini’s idea of *strategic points* loosely mirrors Clausewitz’s *center of gravity*. However, Jomini posits two kinds of such points, those with permanence because of their geographical location and those associated with “the masses of the hostile troops and the enterprises likely to be directed against them. . . .”<sup>37</sup> He further defines these points as *decisive* — “those which are capable of exercising a marked influence either upon the result of the campaign or upon a single enterprise” — and a smaller subset called *objective points* — that delineate the object of the campaign or operation.<sup>38</sup> Both, however, relate to the maneuver of friendly forces. Jomini, reflecting on his study of Napoleon’s operations, emphasizes maneuvering against an enemy’s flank to separate operating forces from their base of support. One authority writes, “The great merit of Napoleon as a strategist lay not in simply maneuvering for some limited advantage, but in identifying those points that, if lost, would ‘dislocate and ruin’ the enemy.”<sup>39</sup>

The philosophical style of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* makes it difficult to identify specific references to a concept similar to decisive point. Yet, one can argue that the idea is contained in statements from his discussion of weaknesses and strengths. For example, “Then, if I am able to use many to strike few at the selected point, those I deal with will be in dire straits.”<sup>40</sup> One also can make a comparable case for the sense Sun Tzu conveys when discussing the rapid movement of light troops: “In contending for advantage, it must be for a strategically critical point.”<sup>41</sup>

*Decisive point* came into usage throughout the U.S. military in the 1980s. Despite the fact that its Jominian origins made the term suspect with Clausewitzian disciples, it soon proved useful in planning discussions. The official joint definition states, “A geographic place, specific key event, critical system, or function that allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an enemy and greatly influence the outcome of an attack.”<sup>42</sup> (Readers should not confuse



*decisive points* with *decision points*, which are events in time when a commander must make a decision or act at a geographical location that requires a commander's decision.) The terms *vulnerability* and later *critical vulnerability* entered the military vocabulary in the late 1980s as sort of a synonym for decisive point. The official definitions for *vulnerability* read:

1. The susceptibility of a nation or military force to any action by any means through which its war potential or combat effectiveness may be reduced or its will to fight diminished.
2. The characteristics of a system that cause it to suffer a definite degradation (incapability to perform the designated mission) as a result of having been subjected to a certain level of effects in an unnatural (manmade) hostile environment.<sup>43</sup>

The term *vulnerability* refers to some aspect of a center of gravity or decisive point that is susceptible to attack. When a writer adds the qualifier *critical*, he or she means that not only is the object vulnerable, but that it is important to the enemy or the enemy's defense.

As generally understood in current joint doctrine, especially Joint Publication 3-0, center of gravity is of a higher order than a decisive point. In fact, this manual makes the case that decisive points are "the keys to attacking protected [centers of gravity]." <sup>44</sup> In this sense, decisive points enable an indirect attack on a center of gravity.

## **Intent.**

Although there is no clear linkage to the writings of either Clausewitz or Sun Tzu with the concept of "intent" or "commander's intent," scholars often infer the connection. For example, Martin Samuels, after tracing the concept of center of gravity from Clausewitz to the German Army of World War II states, "A central feature of the *Schwerpunkt* was the *Absicht* (higher intent)." <sup>45</sup> This meant that commanders first provided the intent and then assigned tasks to subordinate unit commanders. If the situation remained unchanged, senior commanders expected their subordinate commanders to focus on accomplishing the task. However, when the situation changed, as it often did, the subordinate commanders were to take the initiative

in order to achieve the intent, either modifying or abandoning the task. Samuels maintains that this system of “[d]irective command first entered official German usage in the Prussian *Exerier-Reglement* of 1806 . . . was extended in 1813 . . . [and] had become firmly rooted by the mid-19th century.”<sup>46</sup> He also contends that it “was established as a coherent theory” and “enforced as official doctrine” under Helmuth von Moltke (the elder) during his 30 years as Chief of the General Staff.<sup>47</sup>

Many students of military operations attribute the operational and tactical successes of the German Army in World War II to its use of *Auftragstaktik*, or mission-type orders. Trevor Dupuy, for example, writes that Germans believe this “concept pioneered by Scharnhorst, fostered by his successors, and brought to perfection by Moltke” was the major factor in their exceptional combat performance over the years.<sup>48</sup>

Fundamentally, the concept of intent rests on the notion that the *reason* a commander assigns a task, that is, its *purpose*, is more important than the task. The idea is to provide the *why* of a mission. If circumstances dictate, subordinate commanders may disregard the assigned task so long as they focus on accomplishing the purpose. Many scholars and theorists urged the American military to adopt mission-type orders during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Service leaders heeded this appeal and directed incorporation of the concept into doctrinal manuals as well as the curricula of professional military schools, but with some confusion.

Doctrine writers questioned where in an operations plan or order to place the reference to intent. For reasons unknown, writers at the time apparently failed to recognize that existing formats for orders and plans placed intent as the second of two parts of the mission statement. Since mission statements as early as 1940 contained a task with an associated purpose or intent, we can easily make the argument that the U.S. military in the 1970s simply rediscovered the term and its great utility. Current joint doctrine confirms this definition of a mission, “The task, together with the purpose, that clearly indicates the action to be taken and the reason therefore.”<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, proponents advertised intent—in the sense of purpose or reason—as a central part of the new thoughts introduced into operational doctrine in the 1980s and 1990s.

In practice, users often displace the correct meaning of intent with “intention,” that is, a design or determination to act in a certain way. Consequently, users regularly express intent as something a commander plans to do to an enemy rather than *why* he or she intends to take an action. For example, “Commander’s intent is the commander’s personnel verbal and graphic summary of the unit mission and concept of operation that establishes a description of the mission objective and method . . . .”<sup>50</sup> Less frequently, but no less erroneously, users describe intent as the *result* desired. This is illustrated in the words of an advocate of the concept who wrote that a mission-type order “involves telling a subordinate what result he is to obtain, usually defined in terms of effect on enemy, then leaving him to determine how best to get it.”<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, *intent* is not defined in joint doctrine, but *intention* is — “An aim or design (as distinct from capability) to execute a specified course of action” — confirming the explanation above.<sup>52</sup>

### **Commander’s Intent.**

At about the same time as the U.S. military began reintroducing the term intent into its lexicon, the U.S. Army revised the format of its operations plans and orders adding a paragraph titled *commander’s intent*. This paragraph was to capture the commander’s thinking behind the concept of operations. Doctrine developers at the time believed that too often a commander’s reasoning, assessments, and guidance were lost when reduced to a few sentences in the “concept of operations” paragraph.<sup>53</sup> In addition, they felt that subordinate commanders should not have to divine their senior’s intentions. Doctrine writers eventually added the paragraph to the formats of joint orders and plans as subparagraph (1) under paragraph “3. Execution, a. Concept of Operations.”<sup>54</sup> The official definition for the term states:

A concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired end state that serves as the initial impetus for the planning process. It may also include the commander’s assessment of the adversary commander’s intent and an assessment of where and how much risk is acceptable during the operation.<sup>55</sup>

The purpose or intent in the commander's intent paragraph obviously should mirror the intent contained in the mission statement.

Today, in some plans and orders, the paragraph often becomes an unfocused discussion of many unrelated items and can run to many pages. Moreover, some commanders and staff erroneously assume this paragraph is the heart of a mission-type order, which, of course, it is not. That distinction rests with the intent or purpose declared in the mission statement in a plan or order's paragraph 2.

## **Mission.**

Although military staffs have existed in some form since the 17th century, it was not until the post-Jena Prussian reforms that staffs consisted of well-schooled officers. Only after the reforms inspired by Elihu Root and the mandates of the Congressional General Staff Act of 1903 began to take effect did the U.S. military create professional staffs. The bureaucracies surrounding these staffs soon produced standard and approved methods for accomplishing planning, many of them borrowed from European nations. Mission statements were often at the center of these methods.

A mission statement tells subordinate commanders what the higher commander wants them to do, the task, and why they are to do it, the purpose or intent. Though there are several definitions in joint doctrine, it is the first one that interests us:

1. The task, together with the purpose, that clearly indicates the action to be taken and the reason therefore.
2. In common usage, especially when applied to lower military units, a duty assigned to an individual or unit; a task.
3. The dispatching of one or more aircraft to accomplish one particular task.<sup>56</sup>

## **End-State.**

During the intellectual renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, officers became interested in defining how things would look after military

forces secured an objective or accomplished a mission. The term decided upon was *end-state*. It does not refer to the actual securing of an objective or to the accomplishment of a mission, but to the general conditions desired to be in place when these events happen. The joint definition for the term is, "The set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives."<sup>57</sup>

## Objective.

Another term that came into usage early among staffs was *objective*, most often referring to a specific geographic location. Tactical and operational level staffs use the term most frequently. At the strategic level, it is more often a goal relating to a changed condition. The official joint definitions are:

1. The clearly defined, decisive, and attainable goals towards which every military operation should be directed.
2. The specific target of the action taken (for example, a definite terrain feature, the seizure or holding of which is essential to the commander's plan, or, an enemy force or capability without regard to terrain features). See also target.<sup>58</sup>

Users sometimes employ *target* in place of objective. The joint definition that applies to this use is, "An area, complex, installation, force, equipment, capability, function, or behavior identified for possible action to support the commander's objectives, guidance, and intent."<sup>59</sup>

## An Example.

The following example at the operational level illustrates potential uses of the various terms described above. Theorists admonish commanders to focus on the enemy, not on terrain and certainly not on process. An analysis by the commander in this case determines that the *center of gravity* for the enemy he faces is a corps size organization. The unit, however, has excellent defenses, and the commander decides that a direct attack on it would be very costly. The enemy, though, would be *vulnerable* if attacked while moving,

which it is likely to do if it sees friendly forces withdrawing. The commander decides to feint a withdrawal. He also decides that the enemy would offer a *critical vulnerability* if attacked as it tried to cross the White River, so he designates the three bridges over that river in his area as *decisive points*. He then makes these bridges *objectives* and assigns the *mission* of seizing them to one of his own divisions. The unit's *missions* read, "Seize bridges (*task*) over White River in your zone of action in order to prevent the enemy from continuing to move south (*intent*)." Finally, he defines the *end-state* he desires: The enemy corps halted north of the White River and damaged to such an extent it will be unable to conduct offensive operations for at least 96 hours, and friendly units in defensible positions south of the river, re-supplied, and prepared to exploit the situation within 6 hours. The *end* is a specified level of damage to the enemy corps. The *means* to accomplish this *end* are the divisions of the friendly corps. The *ways* are the seizure of the three bridges to halt the enemy's movement.

## ENDNOTES

1. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 5, *Planning*, Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, July 21, 1997, p. 4.

2. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 579.

3. Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815-1945*, in an e-mail note to Paul K. Van Riper, October 8, 2002.

4. *On War*, Book One, Chapter One, p. 75.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

8. Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd edition, London: Frank Cass, 2001, pp. 77-78.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

10. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd edition, New York: Praeger, 1967, p. 335.

11. J. C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control*, John B. Hattendorf, ed., reproduction of 1967 edition, Annapolis, MD, 1989, p. 14; cited in Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 18.

12. Colin Gray, p. 17.

13. See, in particular, Colonel Arthur F. Lykke, Jr., "Towards an Understanding of Military Strategy" *Military Strategy: Theory and Application – A Reference Text for the Department of Military Strategy, Planning and Operations 1983-1984*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, pp. 1-2 to 1-6.

14. Dennis M. Drew and Donald M. Snow, *Making Strategy: An Introduction to National Security Processes and Problems*, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, August 1988, p. 13.

15. John M. Collins, *Military Strategy: Principles, Practices, and Historical Perspectives*, Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002, p. 3.

16. Joint Publications 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, Washington, DC, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 10, 2001, p. III-2.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 595-596.

18. *Ibid.* See also Antulio J. Echevarria II, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: It's Not What We Thought," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. LVI, No. 1, Winter 2003, pp. 71-78.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 617.

20. Samuel B. Griffith, trans., *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 77-78.

21. Handel, p. 57.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

23. Bruce Gudmundsson, "Field Stripping the *Schwerpunkt*," *Marine Corps Gazette*, December 1989, p. 30.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31. See also Timothy T. Luper, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War*, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, July 1981; and Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918*, New York: Praeger, 1989.

26. James J. Schneider and Lawrence L. Izzo, "Clausewitz's Elusive Center of Gravity," *Parameters*, September 1987, p. 50.

27. Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. from French by G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1863, p. 77.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

31. Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918*, London: Frank Cass, 1995, p. 8.

32. Attributed to William S. Lind in Robert R. Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle*, Novato, CA: Presidio, 1991, p. 51.
33. Phillip K. Giles and Thomas P. Galvin, *Center of Gravity: Determination, Analysis, and Application*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, January 31, 1996, p. iii.
34. Joe Strange, *Centers of Gravity & Critical Vulnerabilities: Building on the Clausewitzian Foundation So That We Can All Speak the Same Language*, Quantico, VA: Command and Staff College Foundation, 1996, p. 2.
35. On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/index.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/index.html).
36. Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, pp. III-22-III-23.
37. Jomini, *The Art of War*, p. 77.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
39. John Shy, "Jomini," *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Peter Paret, ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 154.
40. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, trans., London: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 98.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
42. On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/d/01520.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/d/01520.html).
43. *Ibid.*
44. Joint Publication 3-0, pp. III-22 and III-23.
45. Samuels, p. 10.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945*, London: MacDonald and Janes, 1977, p. 307.
49. On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/m/03426.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/m/03426.html).
50. David A. Fastabend, "The Application of the Commander's Intent," *Military Review*, August 1987, p. 62.
51. William S. Lind, "The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare," Richard D. Hooker, Jr., ed., *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993.



52. On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/i/02699.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/i/02699.html).

53. Conversation between Paul K. Van Riper and Richard Sinnreich, February 4-5, 2003.

54. Joint Publication 5-00.1, *Joint Doctrine for Campaign Planning*, Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 25, 2002, p. C-5.

55. On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*., available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/c/01102.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/c/01102.html).

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*